

## Why We Love War [excerpted]

By [Lawrence Leshan](#) and [Adapted From The Psychology Of War: Comprehending Its Mystique And Madness](#)

Published on October 22, 2007

To understand why humans go to war, and have done so throughout history, we have to acknowledge certain psychological facts. One of these is a relatively recent scientific insight: that humans organize our perceptions of reality in a variety of different ways, and that we often shift between these modes without being aware of it. No single mode reveals the absolute “truth” of the world around us, and each has advantages and disadvantages. We also know that during war our view of reality is quite different than it is in peacetime. Once this shift occurs, war becomes more difficult to prevent or to stop. Learning to recognize this shift allows us to see the signs that a society is moving toward war—and to understand what must be done if war is to be avoided.

War is not an entirely universal activity—there have been a few cultures in which it is unknown. But under almost every form of economic and political organization, regardless of different family structures, child-rearing practices, and other social norms, people fight wars on a fairly regular basis. The problem of why we go to war has been with us for a long time. *The Histories*, written by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C., was one of the first attempts to pinpoint the causes of a particular war (in this case, between the Greeks and Persians). Since then, countless investigators have studied the causes of other conflicts, but attempts to generalize from their conclusions have failed. Though many theories have been developed on why war is so widespread, none has helped to stop it, and none fits the actual data on how war happens.

Today, no single theory on the cause of war is generally accepted. There’s been a lot of discussion about using our knowledge of psychology, sociology, and other social sciences to prevent war. Much has been done on *techniques*—such as intercultural student exchange, international organizations, international mediation efforts, and armament reduction—for reducing war’s likelihood. But there appears to be a great reluctance to deal with general theories about the cause of war—or even to admit such theories are necessary.

Before we can find new ways to prevent war, we have to understand why it is so popular. War at least *promises* to fulfill some fundamental human need or tension. One central human tension is the problem of how to be both an individual and a part of the larger group. Many of the great literary works explore this theme, dealing over and over with how we try to reconcile these conflicting drives. The same issue runs through modern textbooks on psychology, sociology, and anthropology. On the one hand is the drive to be more and

more unique and individual, to heighten one's experience and being. On the other hand is the drive to be a part of something larger, a full-fledged member of the tribe.

The writer Jo Coudert recounts:

And in England, shortly after the war, I commented to a Londoner what a relief it must have been to have the bombings ended. "Oh," she said, "it was a marvelous time. You forgot about yourself and you did what you could and we were all in it together. It was frightening, of course, and you worried about getting killed, but in some ways it was better than now. Now we're all just ourselves again."

Any serious effort to protect ourselves against war must concentrate on two areas: why war is so attractive to humans, and why governments so often act against their interests in moving away from peace. Our first step is to increase our awareness of the fact that war is a tempting way to solve certain human problems. We then must begin to teach our young how to achieve these benefits without resorting to armed conflict.

This process can't begin until we acknowledge how easily we shift from sensory reality to mythic reality, especially when international tensions escalate. The point is not to prevent such shifts; all the scientific evidence indicates that they are essential to psychological health. If we encourage the use of alternate realities—as often achieved during meditation, play, listening to or playing music, and so forth—we increase the ability of human beings to reach new potentials. We're also more likely to become familiar with alternate modes of perceiving reality and know what they portend.

The ultimate goal is to be able to consciously *choose* between war and peace, uncontaminated by mythic thinking. The ambitions of a Hitler, a Pol Pot, or a Saddam Hussein may be so bad for the rest of us that declaring war against them is a reasonable and logical decision. But no war will accomplish mythical goals. It will not make the world safe for democracy, nor establish a thousand-year Reich, nor organize a new world order, nor establish the perfect society, nor end war, nor do anything else except solve a particular problem, at a high cost and with unexpected results. And there *will* be unexpected results.

War has been so common in history that many have assumed it to be part of "human nature" or "inevitable to the socialization process." All such theories are comforting in that they lessen our guilt by assuming there is nothing we can do. But in fact other social patterns just as widespread as war, and deemed just as intractable, have been abandoned. We've only given up slavery in the last 150 years. Under the threat of extinction, and using our new knowledge of the social sciences, we must get rid of war.